

**Las que te tienen temblando de noche y de día:**

**A (social) media analysis of IRL #Brujas (not witches) of Instagram**

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When Walter Mercado was on television, my family knew it was time to be quiet and listen—only when he signed off with his signature flourish and the words “paz mucha paz, pero sobre todo mucho, mucho, *amor*,” did we know we could go about the rest of our evening, his advice lingering in our minds.<sup>1</sup> It was through listening to his weekly horoscopes that I was introduced to the world of astrology and the cosmos, where I understood that there was more magic in this life than we let on. However, it wasn’t until years later that I truly came to understand its connection to me, my family, and our spiritual traditions.

My senior year of college came with an overwhelming sense of depression, of dread and exasperation that could only be quelled with binging hours of television. There was a negativity all around me that I could not shake off, and so I did the best thing a 21-year old could do: called my mom. She heard me rant and then she gave me sound mom advice “take care of yourself first,” “stand up to your friend,” “don’t engage with negativity,” but among all these platitudes, what she told me to do next was more tangible advice. She recommended I take three to five eggs (however many I needed) and to rub them over my skin in an outwards motion, she then said to put these eggs in a bag, go to a street corner I don’t cross often and to throw them making sure that they break. In doing so, I would expel the bad energies that the eggs had soaked up—by discarding them into the world, I cleansed the murkiness within me.<sup>2</sup> That winter break anxiety got the best of me once again. I was worried about graduation and jobs I would apply for and

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<sup>1</sup> Emphasis mine. Walter Mercado was a Puerto Rican astrologer and television personality. His predictions and horoscopes aired for decades across the United States and Latin America. For the purposes of this essay I will not be italicizing or translating words in Spanish, not only do I believe that my intended audience will understand the language but also I am attempting to deconstruct the ways in which we think of some languages as “other” and some as normal.

<sup>2</sup> Coincidentally, this video that now has over 28 thousand likes on Twitter shows someone rubbing an egg over the April 2020 entry. I’m assuming it is to “cleanse” the month of its bad energies due to the current global pandemic caused by COVID-19 <https://twitter.com/melbatoast1207/status/1246511894254489607?s=20>.

possibly not get. For this, my mom had another solution: a despojo.<sup>3</sup> First, she had my stepdad, a babalawo, read the caracoles for me.<sup>4</sup> This is a relatively secret and personal matter, and to disclose one's own fortune, is seen as inauspicious. Afterwards, he moved on to the despojo in which he brushed my body with what can only be categorized as a basil bouquet and had me spin around a couple of times as he muttered something under his breath. This was meant to cleanse me of evil spirits that may want to hurt me and put obstacles on my way to success. In these moments of cleansing, not only was my stepdad invoking the divine, but I was also inviting it into my life—to push me through and carry me forward.

I grew up understanding a different conceptualization of spiritual spaces, one that I could access from my own home, whether it was on my television screen or a phone call away. In a piece for WLRN, “Coming Out of the ‘Bruja Closet:’ Miami Coven Honors Latin American Occult Practices,” Sabel Santa said that she believes that everyone is a witch, that there are pieces of us that are connected to something higher than where we are.<sup>5</sup> I am entering the conversation on the formation of digital sacred space through the phenomenon that is Instagram brujería, a growing community of Black and non-Black women of color that are seeking alternative ways of engaging with divinity.<sup>6</sup> In being surrounded by “alternative” ways of

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<sup>3</sup> In Santería “despojo” is a ritual cleansing that can come in different forms: body brushing with herbs, flower-infused showers, using seawater.

<sup>4</sup> A babalawo is a Santería priest. The reading of seashells is something only someone who has a deep understanding of Yoruba myths and the connections of the shells to the Orishas can really give you an accurate reading.

<sup>5</sup> Gonzalez, Alexander. "Coming Out of the ‘Bruja Closet:’ Miami Coven Honors Latin American Occult Practices." WLRN. October 21, 2019. <https://www.wlrn.org/post/coming-out-bruja-closet-miami-coven-honors-latin-american-occult-practices>.

<sup>6</sup> This also includes LGBTQ folks and other gender and gender non-conforming folks that are a part of this online bruja community.

looking at the sacred world and engaging with the divine, which places me in the interesting position of researcher and practitioner/believer; I am able to have some language that helps me open up conversations with brujas or those attuned to Afro-diasporic spiritualities, but while that makes me closely related I am still figuring out the ways in which kinship may or may not connect me with them.<sup>7</sup> Growing up and understanding this space allows me to closely understand what Sabel is getting at: finding a power that is innately within ourselves. The brujas in the WLRN article are connected to a power that is rooted deeply into who they are, who they know they can be, and who the ancestors call them forward to be.

To explore the notions of digital sacredness I will be looking at four accounts of self-identified brujas on Instagram: Chiquita Brujita (@chiquitabrujita), twins Griselda and Miguelina Rodriguez who are best known as the Brujas of Brooklyn (@brujasofbrooklyn), Sabel Santa (@santasabel), and maria ajé, also known as omi (@omithebruja).<sup>8</sup> They each work within different aspects of brujería, and their spiritual backgrounds do not come from one single Afro-indigenous and/or syncretic spirituality. Instead they borrow from different spiritual traditions that are either part of ancestry or they have come to it as they've grown older. In an interview with Chiquita Brujita, she spoke to me on brujería's spiritual malleability: "whether

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<sup>7</sup> Of course, there is also a lot that I do not know even as someone who has grown up with family members who practice Santería. There are still many questions that remain unanswered to me because I am not initiated or crowned. I am also still learning as much as I can about astrology and tarot and all these kinds of metaphysical and new age practices that are closely linked to brujería. I can only speak on the "superstitions" I was raised with and what I have gathered over the years from asking my mom or friends. I think that in thinking alongside Todne Thomas' article I can prospectively think of the forms of connections I am building and what they mean. Thomas, Todne. "Strangers, Friends, and Kin: Negotiated Recognition in Ethnographic Relationships." *Anthropology and Humanism* 41, no. 1 (2016): 66-85. <https://doi.org/10.1111/anh.12108>.

<sup>8</sup> The first two are based in New York City and the latter are based in Miami/South Florida. I will be discussing in my paper the geographical differences that each of the brujas inhabit and how that affects their practices, on top of this is the fact that because of their different geo-locations there are a multitude of spiritual and cultural influences that shape the way they do their work.



you worship Santa Muerte, or you're a practitioner of Vodou, or you practice Candomble in Brazil. These are all different manifestations of brujería in my mind and so these are all people that might identify under this banner of bruja.”

I am significantly interested in understanding how the brujas use social media as a way to enable the divine, thereby forming sacred spaces online. Digital spaces become something more as well—a way for brujas to have a voice in a world that would seek to silence them. There is obviously space for a place as vast as the internet to also be a location in which societal hierarchies are also imposed (Twitter’s vast neo-Nazi/white supremacist population is just one example) but what is especially powerful about the platforms that these brujas have created is that they now have somewhere to let their voices be heard that can easily be amplified (read: go viral) that did not exist before. New media has the capability of making one feel small, especially such a visually centered medium as Instagram, but it is about the formation of community that starts little by little, enhanced by the work that the brujas are doing to be an integral part of their IRL communities.

This essay will look at how their work is not just rooted in the creation of sacred digitality through social media, but also how these spaces become the basis for their activism and social mobilization. The social media presence they create acts against larger hegemonic structures, such as white supremacy, colonialism/imperialism, racism, and homophobia, opening up discourses for a wider digital audience to look at and engage with. I am specifically hoping to explore the ways that digital media has now transformed how newer generations engage with the complicated cosmologies of Afro-indigenous diasporic religiosity. The brujas, with a millennial understanding of how internet trends work, use aesthetics and language that not only appeal to a

pop culture-attuned audience, but also speaks to those that are seeking to identify themselves.<sup>9</sup>

So what do the brujas' social media presence tell us about sacredness in digital spaces and what it means to be spiritual? Does commercialization and commodification play a role? And if so, how do these brujas engage in meaningful spiritual and community based work through a new medium that could just as easily reflect societal preconceptions and prejudices?

Wearing all white, Chiquita Brujita dances under the DUMBO Archway and surrounding streets. In the video she waves around a beautiful yellow silk cloth. She wraps it around her torso and her head, flicking it out to the camera. She is sweeping. Chiquita's smile is beaming as she moves to a remix of Celia Cruz' song to Elegua. Aside from a beautiful performance, this video also serves as an announcement for her upcoming "Brujeria Festival." Her caption reads:

“THIS IS A CALL TO ACTION THIS IS A CRY FOR JUSTICE THIS IS A DEMAND FOR FREEDOM THIS IS AN ACT OF JOY. Meet me and all of the BRUJXS and DRUMMERS and DANCERS and POETS and ARTISTS and TAROT readers, and MAGIC MAKERS and PROUD IMMIGRANTS AND CHILDREN OF THE DIASPORA under the bridge on Saturday September 14th. We will be screaming and drumming and dancing and vending and laughing and drinking and TAKING UP AS MUCH SPACE AS POSSIBLE IN A WORLD THAT WANTS TO MAKE US FEEL SMALL. Pero somos las semillas, lxs nietxs, lxs queers, lxs poderosxs, lxs guerrerxs que somos...aka, SOMOS MÁS Y NO TENEMOS MIEDO.”<sup>10</sup>

As we can see from her caption, Chiquita Brujita is outspoken and political. On her Instagram she makes her feelings known and she is adamant about spreading radical joy, and is also using

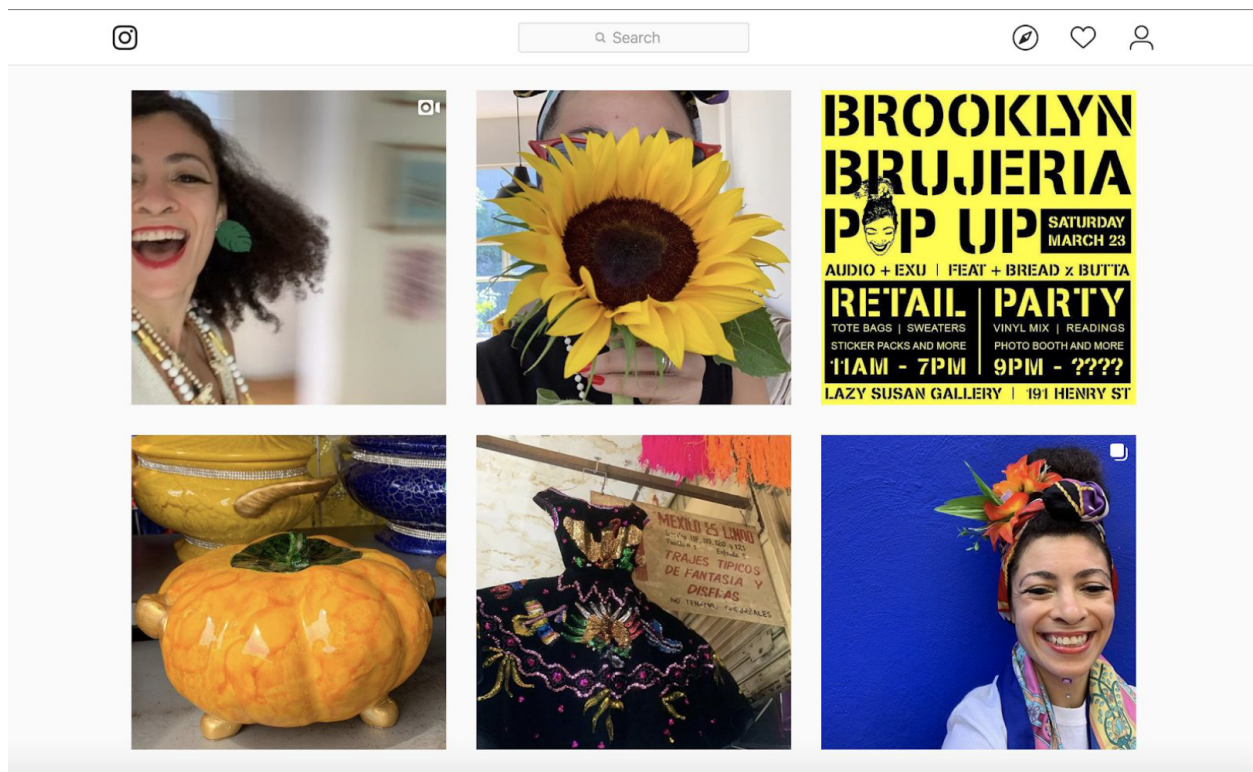
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<sup>9</sup> We can look to Religious Studies scholar Denise Cush who has written about witchcraft and if teenage witches are simply a creation of commercial interests or an actual call to a community of like-minded individuals. Helen Berger and Douglas Ezzy have also done a case study of young witches and their relationship with visual media as a way of their formation of identity.

<sup>10</sup> Chiquita Brujita. 2019. "Brujeria Festival Call to Action." Instagram photo, September 4, 2019. [https://www.instagram.com/p/B1\\_aaHVHErE/](https://www.instagram.com/p/B1_aaHVHErE/)

this space as a way to speak on the social and political movements she cares about. For her, this comes in the form of her spiritual practice as a bruja and as someone who engages with the cosmologies of Santería. Her final statement in her post—we are more and we are not afraid—calls back to the protests that happened over the summer in Puerto Rico asking for the renunciation of its now-former Governor, Ricardo Rosello.<sup>11</sup> For Chiquita, her spiritual work is an act of resistance.

Chiquita’s spiritual lineage comes up most notably in the images she chooses to post on her Instagram feed, her curation of



<sup>11</sup> Chiquita is Nuyoricana and has been involved in the activism efforts in New York City not only to oust the previous governor of Puerto Rico but also regarding any social issues that afflict the island: Hurricane Maria relief efforts and the island’s economic crisis. I believe she used this phrase because those reading her posts will understand what she is referring to, and it is also a collective call to action.

In the image above, we have a view into Chiquita's feed, in it there are objects that at first glance are simply pretty or run of the mill, such as the sunflower she is holding in the top center image or the yellow and pumpkin shaped tureens on the bottom left. However, these are actually sacred to the Orisha Oshun, which Chiquita is the daughter of and is her patron saint/guardian angel. Whether it is intentional or not, she is calling forth a greater power, establishing a connection with herself and the Orisha, and through her posting it on such a large platform, she is also connecting Oshun with the spectator, a simple image becomes spiritually charged. According to cultural and social anthropologist Aisha Beliso-De Jesús, the spirits are allowing open communication between their world and this one. "Messages from oricha and dead spirits heard in one's ear, or seen in visions, dreams, or other forms of spiritual communications are called spiritual transmissions' (*las transmisiones*)."<sup>12</sup> Chiquita said to me in an interview that she feels like New York City's fairy godmother, that in communication with her spirits and ancestors she is blessed to hold those who come to her for spiritual guidance—something that could not occur without the accessibility of her social media.

As I mentioned, in this paper I will be engaging with the accounts of these brujas as a way to open up the conversation about spiritual communications through new media spaces, specifically Instagram. First, I will start by defining the bruja as evidenced through their social media accounts and their experiences with brujería, a hands on type of description that is able to encapsulate what this modern-day brujería is actually about (without having to rely on stereotypical or outdated definitions). I cannot talk about modern-day Instagram brujería without also talking about the popularization and rise of the witch through various media spaces. It is

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<sup>12</sup> Beliso-De Jesús, Aisha M. *Electric Santería : Racial and Sexual Assemblages of Transnational Religion. Gender, Theory, and Religion*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015.

important as well to note that these women are also promoting themselves through this platform and not only selling material objects but also spiritual services, they are what Chiquita would call “brujapreneurs.”<sup>13</sup> Finally I will be discussing how these women use these spaces as a form of community formation. Through using the aesthetics people recognize, using media to promote themselves, connect with others, and also engaging in deep spiritual work they are then able to transpose what they are doing via social media to real life spaces (such as Chiquita’s festival) that exist beyond the boundaries of digital space.

### **Defining La Bruja: “We say bruja, not witch”**

All five women call themselves brujas. They are making a move to reclaim the term that for a very long time has been used as derogatory for those who engage with earth and body based spiritualities that fall outside of hegemonic religious structures.<sup>14</sup> It would be a mistake, however, to simply apply the term “brujería” without further contextualization or to assume that their practices only specifically derive from Afro-diasporic spiritualities, like Santería.<sup>15</sup> In *Electric Santería*, Beliso-De Jesús explains how even the name of Santería was a colonial label.

“The term Santería was pejorative and used interchangeably with *brujería* (witchcraft), signifying the improper worship of Catholic saints. While many practitioners choose not to use this term to describe their practice, it continues to function, along with *santero*, as a discourse of religious power.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Chiquita Brujita has now restructured her social enterprise in which the money that she makes from selling her candles and totes online are now going to support her annual Brooklyn Brujería Festival.

<sup>14</sup> In this case, it would be the Catholic Church.

<sup>15</sup> For many years, Santeros across Cuba and the diaspora have been negatively called brujxs, and there is still great stigma over those who participate and are initiated in the religion because of vast misunderstandings and generalizations.

<sup>16</sup> *Electric Santería* 82

Chiquita is the only one of the five brujas that connects very specifically with the practices of Santería. She says she is a third-generation bruja (and Nuyorican)—her grandmother was crowned Yemaya and Shango back in the 70s, and her mother was crowned Oshun and Shango. omi is also an Orisha devotee but according to my interview with her, her spiritual practice is that of Isese (another Yoruban tradition). The twins, Brujas of Brooklyn have previously mentioned they are practitioners of Dominican Vudú, known as las 21 Divisiones. And Sabel Santa leans more into astrology and what can be considered pagan magick.

I want to start by defining “brujería” because of the multidimensionality of the term, According to *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Latinos and Latinas in the United States* it is “Spanish witchcraft, originated in medieval Spain where it was identified with witchcraft, an earth religion practiced by the ancient Celts.”<sup>17</sup> I would like to note here that there are very little non-hegemonic academic definitions of the term “bruja” that I could find to provide a more concise definition that was not tied to the Oxford Encyclopedia. Outside of using the very Instagram accounts of these brujas, there are no other institutional sites of knowledge. This should allow us to rethink what we think and believe as sites of knowledge production. When I spoke to Chiquita when she told me about “why bruja” she mentioned that she’s been known as la brujita chiquita for many years in her family. Her conceptions of bruja were tied to the people she knew to be as practitioners of Santería or Ifa, she then chose to publicly become Chiquita Brujita in college once she started to more deeply delve into her spiritual lineage and started to reclaim narratives usually seen as negative. Sabel, omi, and the Brujas of Brooklyn also have very similar coming to the term stories—which only highlights the limits of academic knowledge

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<sup>17</sup> The Oxford Encyclopedia of Latinos and Latinas in the United States, 2005.

production, and the need for a more wide-ranging scope of how to define spiritual terms and practices. We can think of these brujas' Instagram accounts *as* sites of knowledge production. Take for example the image below from Sabel Santa's @brujxschool. In her caption she states that she "created Brujx School to empower all of us who identify with magick...Queer Brown and Black folk have a deep connection to spirit...It's our time to reclaim our power."



In reclaiming this power Sabel is also putting forth a new way of defining what it means to be a brujx (the gender neutral form of the word) as a Black queer woman. She did this challenge for the month of October 2019, in posting it on her account she is making it accessible to non-binary, queer, trans, gender non-conforming, Black, Brown, immigrant, indigenous, disabled, neurodivergent Brujxs, and in that way they could create community with one another. One of the #31daysbrujx post of hers that really caught my attention, and also further reconceptualized the definition of bruja/x was the one from day two: The Journey. In the picture



she is dressed entirely in black, with a hat that partly obscures her face, and she is holding a sign that says “QUEER.” (Pictured below). She starts off the caption by saying that coming out as gay was easier than coming out as a witch—where it only took 18 years to accept her queerness, her “journey to magick” was much more complicated. Within this framework she gives us and with the image, she allows us to understand brujería for her has been a journey that she has always been attuned to. In the WLRN article Santa says “she has called herself a witch since she was 13 years old. She became interested in channeling energy (which is how some witches describe witchcraft) to deal with a painful chronic blood disorder.”<sup>18</sup> Although her connection to magic came at a young age, she found herself trying to hide it, to put it away so that others would not burn her for it, pun not fully intended.



<sup>18</sup> WLRN



This need to hide herself can be linked back to brujería's history when it was brought to the New World by the conquistadores. They did not notice that in their desire to convert the indigenous people, the enslaved people of Africa, to Catholicism what they enabled were various syncretic religions across Latin America. It is how we find Santería in Cuba, Vodú in the Dominican Republic (and Haiti), and remnants of Aztec and Mayan cosmologies in Mexico and Central America. Each form of brujería takes a special shape depending on where in Latin America it comes from. In each case, the purpose of syncretization was, in fact, to protect these communities from persecution. Brujería, in any of its forms, is about the ways in which people can overcome the forces of nature.<sup>19</sup> Allowing for Afro-Latinas today, such as the Brujas of Brooklyn to redefine what it looks like to be a bruja—their work comes in the form of collective healing, in a podcast for Wildly Rooted they speak of “healing generational traumas of gendered racism, which women of color often hold in our wombs, or Yonis. Their craft is therefore dedicated to womb-healing, or what they call Woke Womb Work.”<sup>20</sup> Both twins hold PhDs (one in Sociology with a focus on Gender Studies, the other in Urban Planning and Public Policy) and actively hold workshops within their womb wellness work, while at the same time establishing and reclaiming the title “bruja.” In the image below one of them calls herself a modern bruja, and in the caption she is quoting Robert Ingersoll about the creation of knowledge that was allowed when the serpent offered Eve the forbidden fruit. This is her opening up a completely innovative way to think about and define what knowledges and historical truths have been laid out for

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<sup>19</sup> There are instances in which people conflate brujería with curanderismo, but one is not necessarily connected to the other—curanderas are mostly focused on indigenous healing practices.

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.wildlyrooted.com/fywpodcast/brujasofbrooklyn>

public understanding, and how she and her sister as modern brujas can help in the rethinking and rebuilding of this identity and spirituality.



There is an exchange between all of these earth-based spiritualities—they speak to each other not only because of their rootedness on the magical properties of the earth and all natural elements, but also because there is a strong lineage of fighting back. Chiquita Brujita’s call to action in her Brujería Festival announcement brings this to mind—and so, it comes as no surprise that the colonized people of the Americas, and enslaved Africans would want to hold onto a spiritual power that could change the course of their lives. Chiquita recognizes the importance of this lineage, “I remind people that this is Afro-diasporic, that this is coming from the continent. That I am practicing a Black religion. That I am Black.” She reaffirms her roots in her spirits.

The connection between these brujas comes from something ancient. Omi spoke about what united her spiritual practices, all tied by three focus points: herself, her ancestors, and her community.

“I honor my ancestors by celebrating the things that connect me to them in this plane. I honor myself by being out there openly and speaking about who I am and how I am and being myself proudly. And I honor the community by holding these spaces and crafting these spaces and inviting people to live their truth the same way I live mine.”

To her, this is how she is rooted to her practice—the ways that her magic can be most useful. For omi there is no other way to really access this power without the interconnections that for better or for worse are discovered intensely in the diaspora.

Here I make a distinction between what we know as witchcraft across Europe and what I am presenting as brujería for the purposes of this essay. While, yes, of course there are connections in all sorts of magic practices, what these women further portray and explore is their lived reality as people reclaiming traditions from homelands marred by the effects of colonialism, racism and imperialism. What was once lost, is now carried on in their spirits, transnationally. Beliso-De Jesús picks up on these diasporic microintensities, as they relate to Santería, she asserts:

“Or perhaps in recognizing these desires as microintensities of feeling diaspora, we might see the power of mundele, bundanga, and negro brujo as affectivities, haunting-conjurings that are partical, momentary, and evanescent copresences of ethnography and Santería.”<sup>21</sup>

According to her, the desire for spiritual and magical connection comes from the search for “bundanga” or the mysterious—that exists within various temporalities. These multiple

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<sup>21</sup> Electric Santería 34

temporalities are where these brujas exist, as children of the diaspora, or children of exile—being pushed continuously away from what roots them in their identity. And so, they are brought back to it through their practice of brujería, further reaffirming their reclaim of the word. For both Chiquita and omi their ancestry and cultural traditions are ways for them to tell the world who they are and be visibly seen for that.

Brujería comes from a long line of oppressed people fighting back and against forces that would have their entire cultures be destroyed. In the 21st century, a good way to ensure something lasts forever, is to rely (somewhat) on the internet and digital media. And although the internet can be seen as ephemeral and it does move on from one topic to the next in the blink of an eye, the images that are important to people will stick with them. Audiences will create their own archive so that they can come back to reference.<sup>22</sup> What is Instagram if not an open source archive? Anyone can go through an Instagram account and see a very carefully curated array of photos and captions that make followers feel a certain way. It is a free museum of expression, commercial interests, art, spirituality. It is also how a lot of people create community. For omi, the internet is a source to promote her spiritual practice, while at the same time creating community: “when I started doing spiritual practices again, I realized that there's a way for me to like craft a space online so there's a way to connect with people and it doesn't have to be people that are in the same geographical space as I am.” It opened up the space for others who look like her—it also opens up how the diaspora speaks to and engages with one another. Chiquita talked about how in claiming herself as a bruja so publicly, helped others define themselves this way as well: “The more of us that represent in this way, the more space it gives for us to take practices

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<sup>22</sup> See: All of my screenshots of Oscar Isaac.

that have been ancestral and typically practiced in the shadows, more out into the public that allows people to participate.” Brujas, like the figures I have mentioned, share their posts to provide insights into the various spiritualities they are a part of and represent and they also are a part of creating community within these spaces. In looking through any of their Instagram pages many Latinxs can recognize themselves—it is not just about the racial and ethnic representation, though that is a big part of it, but also about seeing people like them be what they can assume to be their most authentic selves. And although profiles on the internet can be deceiving about what is real or not, at the very least it allows folks to approach these brujas and have open and honest conversations with them.

Sabel Santa, as she said to WLRN, believes firmly that everyone is a witch, that there are parts of us that we have yet to tap into.<sup>23</sup> In the About Me section of her website she invokes both Walter Mercado and Celia Cruz—the former the famous astrologer, the latter is best known as the Queen of Salsa. Santa alludes to Cruz’s way of enchanting people with her gift of music, calling her an Afro-Latinx witch. She is aware of powers that exist outside of simply what one assumes as brujería—she also sees the importance of media representation, as she has experienced in her own life, as one of the many ways people can approach the topic of brujería.

### **Commercialization of La Bruja: “Bringing the spirit to market”**

All forms of popular media and culture shape how we really understand what our “authentic selves.” Whether we want it to or not, we are always going to be looking at those glossy pages of magazines, the films we watch at the theater, and the too many TV shows on the

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<sup>23</sup> <https://www.wlrn.org/post/coming-out-bruja-closet-miami-coven-honors-latin-american-occult-practices>

too many streaming platforms that exist and comparing ourselves to those who portray their versions of our worlds. “When witches don’t fight, we burn,” Kathy Bates delivers this iconic line in the cult classic television anthology series, *American Horror Story: Coven*. This television show is only one in a pantheon of popular culture dedicated to the lifestyles, aesthetics, and magicks of witchcraft.

For many of those in my generation (born and raised from the 1990s to the early 2000s) witchy images have been pervasive in our media landscape. In their book, *Basic Witches: How To Summon Success, Banish Drama, And Raise Hell With Your Coven*, Jaya Saxena and Jess Zimmerman wonder what is so appealing about the witch?<sup>24</sup> Their answer lies in nostalgia. “Women now in their twenties and thirties fondly remember growing up watching *The Craft* and *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, reading Harry Potter, playing ‘light as a feather, stiff as a board’ ...or saving their allowance for a collectible light up Hermione wand.”<sup>25</sup> We owe a lot of our reimaginings of the witch due to the media exposure that they have been given over the last two decades.

However, these reimaginings have had the tendency to be all white characters. We see it from *Buffy’s Willow* to *Harry Potter’s Hermione* to all three *Charmed* sisters. Across generations, the image of the witch has been pointy hats, black cats, flying broomsticks, and going around singing “I Put A Spell On You.” But these media representations are still, majorly white. Only in instances like *The Craft* (1996), *The Vampire Diaries*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*,

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<sup>24</sup> Chew, Camille, Saxena, Jaya and Zimmerman, Jess. *Basic Witches : How to Summon Success, Banish Drama, and Raise Hell with Your Coven*. Philadelphia, PA: Quirk Books, 2017, pg. 12.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 12

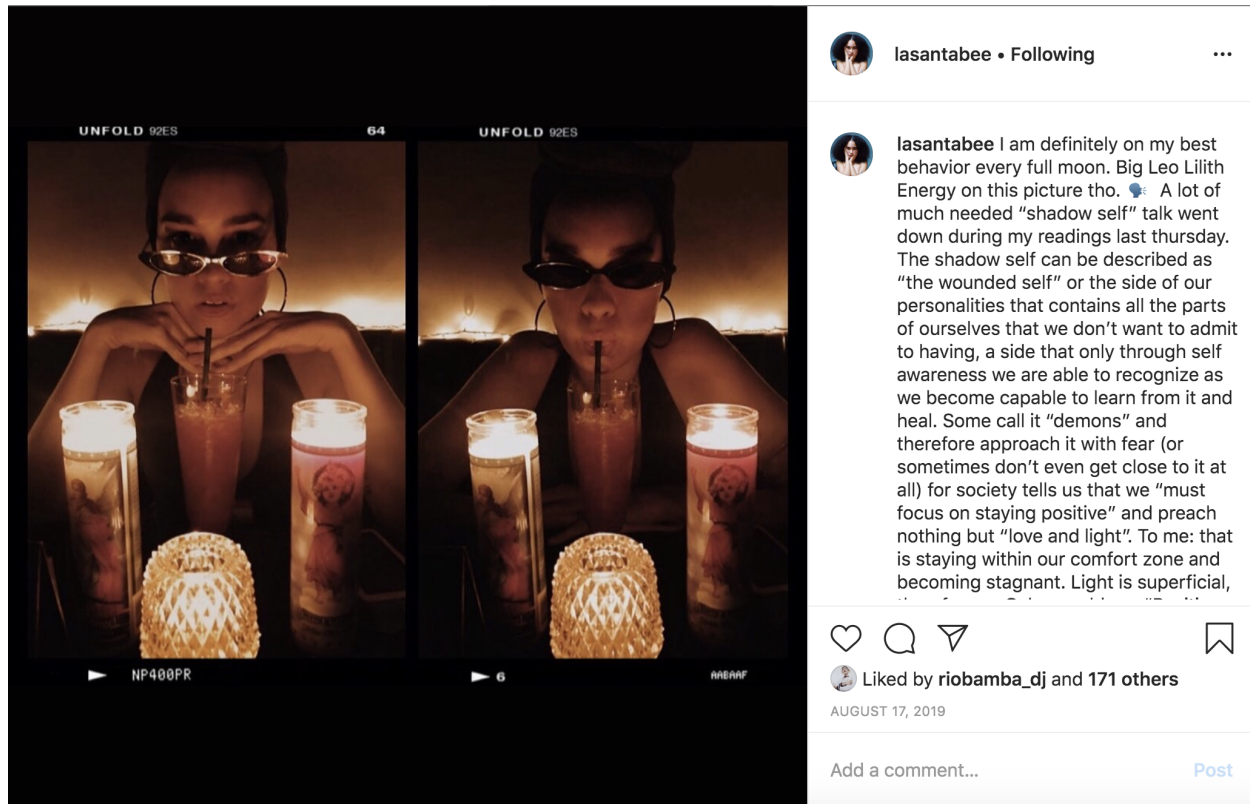
*American Horror Story*, *Twitches*, *Eve's Bayou* and the more recent reboots of *Sabrina* and *Charmed*, have they featured Black or non-white witches.

Returning to the point omi made about seeing people online that do her kind of work that *look* like her, representation is important for drawing in a public that would otherwise be excluded from conversations of *brujería*. It is important to note that in Latin America there is also a racialized aspect to who is called a *bruja*. Usually it is Black women and non-Black women of color who fall under this category—they are demonized not only for their bodies (which calls back to a longer more complex understanding of racial relations in Latin America during and after enslavement) but also because of their spiritual practices and the fact that they are the ones most prone to having healing capabilities that fall outside and beyond Western medicinal hegemony. They are seen as the more superstitious but also those that you call to when you need some type of spiritual work to be done for you. Not only do people see themselves relating to omi but she also evokes this cool millennial witch vibe that could only be right for an Instagram feed aesthetic. Instagram *brujas* are able appeal to a millennial audience that has been influenced (and appreciates) the "white" witch culture of *Harry Potter* and *Buffy*, however they are creating deeper connections to and for the Latinx and Afro diaspora. The phenomenon of modern-day internet witchcraft has been written about by the *Religion News Service*: “That image is the kind of dark, witchy aesthetic you’ve probably seen while scrolling through Instagram...It’s the kind of empowered identity promoted in podcasts about toppling the patriarchy and...the radical importance of self-care.”<sup>26</sup> The *brujas*, however, act upon a different

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<sup>26</sup> Aysha Khan. “Is Tumblr witchcraft feminism or cultural appropriation?” October 27 2017. (<https://religionnews.com/2017/10/27/is-tumblr-witchcraft-feminism-or-cultural-appropriation/>).

level, due to the racial and ethnic connections of their spirituality—which they differentiate from witchcraft.



In one image (pictured above), omi waits for her customers in a dimly lit corner of a bar, hair wrapped, black pointy glasses on, as she sips from a fruity cocktail, her hoops glowing darkly against the glow of votive candles. She is not only giving her Instagram audience the aesthetic they know and understand as her bruja vibe, but in her caption she is also providing information on “shadow selves” and the way they manifest. Instagram is first and foremost a visual platform, and so at first glance what we see is this really cool picture that connotes that bruja vibe that has been established through media representations of the stereotype. She could easily be placed within the world of a hip new CW-TV show and it would work. However, if we look closely at her caption she is actually delving into the work she has been doing in her readings for people



and also in light and shadow work. And how her audience should be not just talking about “love and light” but should really delve deep into the parts of ourselves that are dark or not as comfortable to see. She is doing spiritual work for those who follow her, while looking great at the same time.

Today there are many young people who engage with the metaphysical, because through it, they have been able to find their voice. Tarot cards and birth charts have become part of an overwhelming cultural phenomenon that has permeated from digital spaces to material objects. We see these “witch packages” in stores like Sephora and Urban Outfitters while meditation and healing crystals have become part of people’s daily wellness routine. These sort of material objects could almost possibly be found on Goop.<sup>27</sup>

The witch has also become an image of resistance, one that stands up to those in power to keep nature in balance. Chiquita and omi both spoke about how they see their work as brujas absolutely tied into their social activism. There is no differentiation for them. Chiquita said “I don’t separate [activism] from being a person of faith from any identity for me that’s rooted in active practice of brujería.” Omi similarly replied when she was asked if she split up her political and the spiritual: “Everything we [brujas] do is a political statement. Everything is standing our ground. Everything we do is reclaiming our roots, our spaces, our energy. When I talk about openly being a bruja [I claim] that as a political statement.

Under today’s political climate, this witch image has been easy to commercialize and disseminate across social media. Peg Aloi and Hannah Johnson write about this political aspect of the witch in their introduction for *The New Generation Witches*, “As the feminist and gay

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<sup>27</sup> Gwyneth Paltrow’s very highbrow lifestyle and wellness blog.

rights movements asserted themselves, so too did an approach to contemporary spirituality that broke down patriarchal norms.”<sup>28</sup> At this moment in time, we see the use of political witchcraft more prominently within social movements such as the Women’s March where many posters in the past few years have used *Harry Potter* references, there were even Facebook events surrounding Donald Trump’s election that called on witches to place a curse on the president-elect. A simple quote has turned out to be a calling card for many women across the country, and even the world. The quote is from Tish Thawer’s *The Witches of BlackBrook*, it has been hyper-commercialized and sold through various sorts of knick knacks but still rings with a truth: “We are the granddaughters of the witches you weren't able to burn.”<sup>29</sup>

These brujas, *do* work—their practice and engagement with magical elements *is* their work. Which is why I not only need to understand the draw of witchcraft via the internet and popular media but also the added layer of commerciality here. These women are not just engaging in spiritual practices through their Instagrams, they are also turning a profit as they sell their “wares,” as I have previously mentioned. Some of what is being sold in their stores are spiritual and mystical objects such as candles, but some also sell tote bags, mugs, tarot cards, etc. Others sell their “services,” doing tarot card readings, or outlining a person’s star chart. And so, existing within this cultural and sociopolitical market the brujas have been able to create a market of their own. What Chiquita calls: bringing spirit to market. When she first started

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<sup>28</sup> Aloï and Johnson 3

<sup>29</sup> However, in certain spaces on the internet (Twitter in particular) among Black women and non-Black women of color this quote has been more closely related to white neo-liberal women and therefore does not ring as true for people of color. There is even a Tweet going around that says something along the lines of “white women when they find out they were the ones doing the burning” linked to a TikTok of a young white woman screaming angrily.

publicly identifying as Chiquita Brujita she created a divination system that would give you a color and energy word and a color that would be linked to an Orisha. When she mentioned it to her mom, she immediately replied with “this is not real.” Chiquita defended her fortune system by saying that of course it is real, that although it was not part of Ifa or Santería, it still meant something because she was exchanging energies with people. After conceding to her aura work, Chiquita’s mom replied simply: “well you have to charge something when you’re doing these readings, because you ashe is not free.” The concept of ashe, a Yoruban philosophical concept, is deeply linked to a person’s energy and divine force. And, according to Chiquita’s mom, it should never be given away for free. And so Chiquita noted that through the market is a way that spirit “is sustained in these communities, whether that’s paying for a reading, buying a fixed candle.” Everything comes at a cost, including her bruja printed totes and jackets.

One of the major aspects of the brujas being well-represented in social media is the way that they have been able to talk about the Afro-diasporic spiritualities that have not been spoken about in such a nuanced way. I have previously mentioned that while Santería is obviously not the only Afro diasporic religious identity that these brujas are borrowing from, it is for Chiquita. She has, in turn, proceeded to bring her understanding of this cosmology into the twenty-first century in a way that is wholly innovative and practical.



In the image above Chiquita Brujita creates, what she calls, an altar in the club for Elegua. In the pantheon of orisha deities Elegua is the deity of roads, he is known for opening up paths for those who are searching for them. Chiquita also makes constant and consistent use of the hashtag #SuchanOchun. Here, she is likening herself to the deity of the rivers and fertility, one of the most (if not *the most*) important orisha in the pantheon of Santería. Chiquita and I talked about her usage of the hashtags and their importance in the archival spiritual work that she is doing on Instagram:

“it’s not an experiment in marketing...it’s more an experiment of being public and using this platform and these tools. I can categorize things under this hashtag. What does it mean to be an Oshun? And I’m like ‘that picture of Beyoncé.’ I think expanding the contemporary awareness of these archetypes and playing with it a little bit. I think about how much art we have in The Met, bringing it back to this museum of things we value, but how much religious art constitutes the artistic canon and the ways that we thought about Mother Mary and Jesus. These depictions that were basically the only thing that folks were painting for so long. Why

not allow something to start pasting my face all over New York as a manifestation of the divine? Why not identify myself as an Oshun in community with these other energies of divinity and these other representations of godliness?”

Chiquita is allowing for her divinity, and for the divinity of others like her to be shown proudly and across large platforms. Not only are staying within the confines of the digital space, which is where she first and foremost started this movement, but then she also challenges her audience to go forward and become these essences of the divine.

The use of hashtags is a way to relate, to keep it casual—after all, this *is* the internet, and at the same time, it is a deep spiritual practice because she is connecting herself to a sacred being, which also connects Chiquita to her own roots as an Afro-Latina. This latter identity a crucial factor to who these women are.<sup>30</sup> Griselda Rodriguez-Solomon, one half of Brujas of Brooklyn wrote in an article for *Hip Latina* how reclaiming the bruja identity is important for Afro Latinas, especially after her trip to Senegal and West Africa: “I learned about African cosmologies on life, the earth, and humanity; I also recognized that, as a Dominican, I was Black...Heartbreak, homesickness, and the pressures of being an Afro-Latina in a white school pushed me to seek guidance from a higher power...at 24 years old, with the help of an elder Priestess...I built my first altar.”<sup>31</sup> This recognition within herself of a part that is missing, due to colonialism, imperialism, and racism, is something that diasporic communities are highly aware of and at times (like Griselda’s case) actively work against. “Diaspora has been a useful theoretical formulation to decenter particular nationalist lenses, allowing for multilocational and

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<sup>30</sup> With the exception of The Mexican Witch who, to my knowledge, does not identify as Afro-Latina.

<sup>31</sup> Rodriguez-Solomon, “Why Reclaiming Bruja Identity is Important for Afro-Latinas,” *Hip Latina*, Nov. 29, 2018. (<https://hiplatina.com/why-reclaiming-my-bruja-identity-as-afro-latina-is-important/>)

multivocal analysis that have usefully challenged traditional renderings of race, gender, and sexuality alongside movement, space, and place.”<sup>32</sup> The diaspora allows for unsettlement, for the search of home within something that has been taken away. The digging through and reclaiming of the title, makes it that much more important that the brujas have chosen such a wide known and ranging platform such as Instagram—because they have done work already in the process of their own decolonization, and so can then push forward an agenda that other possible and eventual brujas can also follow.

### **Digital Sacredness and Aesthetic Formations: “Build your coven”**

While engaging with cultural analysis and critiques about witchcraft within new forms of media, I also want to delve into cultural theories and issues that come up when we are directly engaging with not just new media and new ways to talk about and engage with religion, but also new religious movements. Because of my focus in cultural theory, this will allow me to do a content analysis of online materials that inform how we view brujería through the ways in which these women want us to see it and understand it as. I am hoping to approach this intersection of religion and media through an understanding of how both these things create communities and aesthetic formations—that are spiritual and technological—as delineated by Birgit Meyer in her introduction to *Aesthetic Formations: media, religion, and the senses*:

While both media and religion have long been located in the sphere of the imagination and virtuality, I advocate an alternative approach that takes their material dimension seriously, so as to grasp how religion and media touch ground and yield tangible forms and formations in social life. By virtue of being mediated via modern media that offer unprecedented possibilities to reach out and articulate religion in the public realm, religious modes of

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<sup>32</sup> Beliso-De Jesús 7

binding and making community transform, and this implies new opportunities, paradoxes, and tensions.<sup>33</sup>

This understanding of how and where religion and media have been located can offer us a view into grasping how religious communities have been formed via Instagram and how these women were able to do that. They are crafting spaces that not only exist within the boundaries that a social media platform can provide, but instead are taking it out into the real world. For example, Sabel Santa will host Moon Magic seminars and how to follow the moon's cycle through one's own healing journey. The Brujas of Brooklyn will host workshops on how to heal from family trauma and illnesses, intergenerationally and bilingually. They are giving back to the community, spiritually, utilizing the pillars that omi spoke about—all connected through the self, the ancestors, and the wider community. They are making magic real and tangible and not just through the formations on the internet, however their digital presence is what allows this to happen in the real world—as was discussed via Chiquita and her hashtags. Meyer talks about the importance of this:

“imagination are required to become tangible outside the realm of the mind, by creating a social environment that materializes through the structuring of space, architecture, ritual performance, and by inducing bodily sensations. In brief, in order to become experienced as real, imagined communities need to materialize in the concrete lived environment and be felt in the bones.”<sup>34</sup>

This tangibility, that exists because of the internet though it manifests outside it, is what creates the communities that the brujas are attempting to carve out in a world that wasn't made for them.

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<sup>33</sup> Meyer, Birgit. *Aesthetic Formations : Media, Religion, and the Senses*. 1st ed. Religion/culture/critique. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. pp. 2-3.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid 5

The brujas can access the sort of power that was taken from them through colonial and hegemonic understandings of what is deemed as properly “religious” or “spiritual.”

One of the major ways that omi and Sabel have been building alternative communities outside of social media has been through the help of the recently formed Miami mystic directory of Eleventh House. Eleventh House started off hosting monthly queer astrological parties in which people would have their birth charts done and their tarot cards read—at times if you came dressed to the theme, you would get a free shot. omi points to this directory as being a pivotal point in her career. “Eleventh House opened the roads for a lot of us as practitioners because at the end of the day this is an actualized space, a space that is modern. This is an opportunity for you to actually do work with people who look like you.” She thanks the internet (and Sabel) for being able to find this connection that has greatly benefited her work and practice. omi said she is a very internet person, even showing me the little cursor she has tattooed behind her ear. And while it may seem that through this very specific party those who reach her might be limiting, omi actually said that there are people who reach out to her at the Eleventh House events that would have never contacted her otherwise. Similarly Chiquita’s Brooklyn Brujería Festival (pictured below) has opened a lot of opportunities for her that would not have existed without her connection to Instagram. This is where her spiritual, social activism, and artistry come together (although she would not simply place those identities on herself). Through the festival she has been able to build spiritual awareness, rituals, and an identity that become associated with positivity and light working with magic. And those who will want to identify with the term bruja will associate the magic along those lines.





**chiquitabrujita** • Following  
Dumbo Archway

**chiquitabrujita**  
#ANightofBrooklynBrujeria // 2018 •

•  
•  
🌟 #brujitaspeaks ⚡ As I am in the throes of building set pieces and sending production emails and worrying about the forecast for this Saturday's #brooklynbrujeriafestival, I wanted to share some of my favorite photos from last year's gathering beneath the bridge. 🌟 •

•  
•  
⚡ Looking at these photos has me remembering that all of the chaos that happens behind the scenes is how magic is made. 🌟 And that magic is strongest when used for protection. 🛡️ So I keep making space. Making space

👍 🗨️ 📌

Liked by **lisettepoole** and **840 others**

SEPTEMBER 10, 2019

Add a comment...

Post



**chiquitabrujita** • Following  
Dumbo Archway

**chiquitabrujita** 🌟💖 JOY IS AN ACT OF RESISTANCE 🌟💖

•  
•  
Going through photos of the festival as I realign my sleep schedule and get back to life and I am just still in a state of shock and the deepest gratitude for all the visions that manifested, the multitude of blessings that unfolded, and the continued urgent need for us to proclaim our pride and joy and

👍 🗨️ 📌

Liked by **mario\_ruben\_** and **754 others**

SEPTEMBER 17, 2019

Add a comment...

Post

She considers her Instagram presence, “this amazing megaphone and this platform for me that i’m able to benefit from because miraculously I have followers.” She has also been able to connect with other fellow public brujas such as Emilia Ortiz (@ethereal.1), who was tagged in an

article with her and they have been in deep friendship since.<sup>35</sup> “Our spirits were like ‘we need each other.’ Being able to have her in my life is such a blessing. We’re actually in community, we’re actually friends. If I’m selling anything, I’m selling, find your people and build your coven because we need each other.” And that is at the core of the community building that the brujas have been creating through their social media. The notion that to have others whose spirit connects with yours at a deeper level is what divine force is about—and to be able to find that because of the internet, makes it a powerful tool in its instilling of sacred spaces.

## Conclusion

There is power in followers. This much is clear across all world religions, and so why should brujería on Instagram be any different? There is obviously a call by Black women and non-Black women of color to open up spaces in which they can be unapologetic in their resistance and fight and struggle against hegemonic structures that for so long have wished for them to simply be silent. These five women have found a way of being that works for them and are trying to, not replicate but, promote a lifestyle and way of being. And so, where do we go from here? There is so much that there is still to be done when we talk about brujería and its slow overtaking of Instagram aesthetics and community formation. Starting with an even further dive into the way they have been commercializing their brujería as various profitable businesses. The “lifestyle” aspect of this is something that deserves to be looked at in this New Age world of yoga and self-help books, and self-care—does this notion of self-empowerment through spiritual

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<sup>35</sup> Emilia Ortiz has over 200,000 followers on Instagram. She has been featured on Vice, Refinery29, Dazed and other media outlets. She is not the only bruja to reach this level of fame, @thehoodwitch is one of the most famous brujas on Instagram, amassing over 400,000 followers along with a line of nail polish with Essie, collaborations with Refinery29 and Coach, to name a few.

power fit in with these? Can they still be working against hegemony if they are working within capitalism? One other aspect of brujería I wish I could have delved deeper into is the topic of race and colorism. What happens when a Black or brown woman calls herself a bruja? Are these women also willing to engage in this conversation? All of this is still due to the fact that we are still working within cis-heteropatriarchal colonial structures of power that unfortunately only give way or allowance to people they deem “respectable.” And so the work continues, to decolonize and destigmatize notions of power and spirituality that for so long have been marginalized. To build up and heal our communities through a joyful spirit, through acts of resistance that leave us breathless as we dance under bridges. To the people who are still searching for that power, there is some sort of hope that this “other space” you seek for will be found; that the ancestors are looking at us and towards us. May we be reminded of what Mama Yaya tells Tituba in Maryse Condé’s *I, Tituba: Black Witch of Salem*: “Don’t let yourself be eaten up by revenge. Use your powers to serve your own people and heal them.”

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